

Message Text

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11

ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03

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USIA-15 SAM-01 SAJ-01 OMB-01 EB-11 TRSE-00 DRC-01

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8000

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY PARIS

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: GENERAL ELECTION: WRAP-UP ON FIRST WEEK

1. SUMMARY: AT THE END OF THE FIRST WEEK OF CAMPAIGNING,
THE CONSERVATIVES APPEAR TO HOLD A SLIGHT ADVANTAGE,
BUT THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTION IS STILL WIDE OPEN.
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND INFLATION REMAIN THE KEY ISSUES.
END SUMMARY

2. AS THE FIRST WEEK OF THE GENERAL ELECTION DRAWS TO
A CLOSE, THE MAIN LINES OF THE CAMPAIGN ARE BEGINNING
TO TAKE SHAPE. THE CONSERVATIVES GOT OFF TO A STRONG
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START BY SEIZING ON THE MINERS' STRIKE AS THE WARRANT

FOR AN EARLY ELECTION. "THE MINERS HAD THEIR BALLOT," SAID ONE GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN, "NOW THE PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE THEIRS." THE PRIME MINISTER JUSTIFIED HIS HANDLING OF THE MINERS' DISPUTE AS BOTH FIRM AND FAIR AND ASKED FOR A POPULAR VOTE OF CONFIDENCE. THE ISSUE, HE SAID, WAS BETWEEN MODERATION AND EXTREMISM. BY THE END OF THE WEEK, THAT ISSUE CONTINUED TO OVERSHADOW ALL OTHERS, TO THE ADVANTAGE OF THE CONSERVATIVES.

3. LABOR, HANDICAPPED BY ITS CLOSE IDENTIFICATION WITH THE MINERS, HAS STRENUOUSLY TRIED TO SHIFT THE FOCUS OF THE CAMPAIGN TO RISING PRICES. THE CONSERVATIVES, HOWEVER, HAVE MET THIS ISSUE HEAD ON. THEY HAVE DEFENDED THEIR OWN RECORD BY POINTING TO THE WORLDWIDE RISE IN COMMODITY PRICES, AND, MORE TELLINGLY, HAVE WARNED THAT LABOR'S REFUSAL TO COUNTENANCE AN INCOMES POLICY AND THE OVERALL COST OF LABOR'S PROGRAM WOULD LEAD TO SHARPLY HIGHER TAXES AND RUNAWAY INFLATION. IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, THE VOTERS' JUDGMENT ON THE QUESTION OF WHICH PARTY WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO CONTAIN INFLATION MAY WELL DECIDE THE ELECTION.

4. LABOR IS ALSO TRYING TO STIR UP POPULAR ANTAGONISM TO THE EC IN AN EFFORT TO WIN VOTES. THE PRIME MINISTER IS DISPOSED TO IGNORE THIS ISSUE, AND FOR THE MOMENT AT LEAST, IT DOES NOT LOOK LIKE A CRITICAL DETERMINANT. MORE TROUBLESOME COULD BE THE CONSERVATIVES' PLEDGE TO MAKE UNIONS HENCEFORTH SHOULD THE COST OF STRIKE BENEFITS THEMSELVES. WHETHER THIS WILL GAIN MORE VOTES AMONG THE MIDDLE CLASS THAN IT WILL LOSE AMONG THE WORKING CLASS IS STILL AN OPEN QUESTION.

5. THE LIBERALS ARE DESPERATELY TRYING TO HOLD A MIDDLE POSITION IN THIS CAMPAIGN. THEY PROCLAIM THEMSELVES AS THE ONLY PARTY NOT TIED TO ANY VESTED INTERESTS -- SECTIONAL, ECONOMIC, OR OTHER -- AND THEY ARGUE THAT THE RETURN OF A SUBSTANTIAL NUMBER OF LIBERAL MPS WOULD SERVE NOTICE ON THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES THAT THE VOTERS ARE WEARY OF LEFT-RIGHT CONFRONTATION POLITICS. THEIR SUPPORT HAS HELD UP SURPRISINGLY WELL, BUT THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ARITHMETIC OF BRITAIN'S FIRST-PAST-THE-POST ELECTORAL SYSTEM WORKS TO THEIR SEVERE DISADVANTAGE. EVEN THEIR MOST OPTIMISTIC SPOKESMEN DO NOT EXPECT THEM TO WIN MORE THAN TWO DOZEN SEATS, AND IF THE ELECTORATE IS POLARIZED IN THE TWO WEEKS REMAINING, THEY COULD LOSE HEAVILY.

6. THE CONDUCT OF THE CAMPAIGN, THUS FAR AT LEAST, HAS

BEEN MORE RESTRAINED AND LESS BITTER THAN WAS ORIGINALLY EXPECTED. THE OPINION POLLS, SO BADLY DISCREDITED IN 1970, GIVE THE CONSERVATIVES A SLIGHT EDGE, BUT MANY OF THE VOTERS REMAIN UNDECIDED. FURTHERMORE, THE EXTENSIVE REDISTRICTING OF SEATS, THE INCALCULABLE IMPACT OF NATIONALIST CANDIDATES IN SCOTLAND AND WALES, AND THE PECULIARLY VOLATILE SITUATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND ALL RENDER A FORECAST OF THE OUTCOME ON FEBRUARY 28 HAZARDOUS.

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